DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 982 RC 019 155

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TITLE Ethnosociology: An Interdisciplinary, Interpretive Research Model for Inquiry in Rural Special Education.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 12p.; In: Montgomery, Diane, Ed. Rural America: Where All Innovations Begin. Conference Proceedings (Savannah, GA, March 11-13, 1993); see RC 019 153.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Data Interpretation; Educational Anthropology; *Educational Sociology; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnography; Existentialism; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Models; *Research Methodology; *Rural Education; *Special Education
IDENTIFIERS Ethnomethodology; Social Construction of Reality

ABSTRACT

This paper describes ethnosociology and provides an application of this interpretive research model in dealing with problems in rural special education. The expansion of rural special education knowledge should begin with discovering and elaborating on special education knowledge at the local theory level. Such inquiry would be based on the following principles of ethnosociology (which combine interpretive anthropology, enthnomethodology, and existential sociology): (1) reality is socially constructed through interaction and reflection, and is constantly changing; (2) cultural meanings provide for the ways to construct realities; (3) individuals choose their actions based on socially constructed local theories of social order; (4) at any given time, local theories of social order are potentially rational and irrational, cognitive and affective, conscious and tactic, and formal and informal; (5) local theories of special education social order are the proper subject matter for an ethnosociology of special education; (6) local theories of social order are primarily accessible through the use of interpretive ethnographic methodologies; and (7) interpretive researchers should reflect on their own local theories of the special education phenomena under study. An application of this model to the problem of recruitment and retention of rural special education teachers is presented. (LP)

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ED358982

Ethnosociology: An Interdisciplinary, Interpretive Research Model for Inquiry in Rural Special Education

Ethnosociology offers rural special educators/researchers a new way of understanding some old problems. Traditional perspectives and approaches for understanding and alleviating these problems have proven to be less than effective (Hepburn, forthcoming). In this article, the authors will present the methods, theoretical viability, and practical applications of ethnosociology, an interpretive research model deriving from ethnomethodology, existential sociology, and interpretive anthropology.

In its relatively short history, a multitude of needs have been identified in rural special education. For the most part, these reported needs have clustered around calls for increased knowledge and understanding in the areas of service delivery, rural values and attitudes, preservice/inservice training, personnel recruitment/retention, securing resources, multicultural problems, families/parents, and supervision and leadership (Hepburn, forthcoming). While there has been a great deal of research conducted in addressing these needs, there has been a notable lack of any interpretive research utilizing qualitative methods. What little that has been done has overwhelmingly utilized descriptive case studies to present various portraits of service delivery (Capper, 1988; Hartley & Wasson, 1989; Helge, 1981, 1989; O'Connell, Minkler, Dereshiwsky, Guy, & Roanhorse, 1992; Potter, Smith, Quan, & Nosek, 1992), rural values and attitudes (Collins, 1992; DePaepe & Walega, 1990; Helge, 1989), preservice/inservice training (Dopheide, Ellis, & Duncan, 1986; Helge, 1989), personnel recruitment/retention (Collins, 1992), resources (Collins, 1992; Vogler, 1990), multicultural issues (Cunningham, Cunningham, & O'Connell, 1987; Hartley & Wasson, 1989; O'Connell, Minkler, Dereshiwsky, Guy, & Roanhorse, 1992), families/parents (Collins, 1992; Helge, 1989; Joyce, 1987; Van Warner, 1985), and supervision/leadership (Capper, 1988; Collins, 1992; DePaepe & Walega, 1990).

There appears to be a shared, underlying assumption common to all of these research efforts. That is, rural settings are as unique as they are typical, calling for more in-depth holistic understandings of specific contexts to guide problem-solving strategies. The ethnosociological method presented herein offers a new, alternative approach to illuminating and interpreting these contextual understandings.

Constructing an Ethnosociology of Special Education[1]

> At a minimum, special education . . . should . . . adopt a multiparadigmatic, multidisciplinary stance. This stance should begin with a multiparadigmatic, metatheoretical critique of special education knowledge--an antifoundational, self-reflective examination of the limits and validity of special education knowledge from the alternative perspective of the multiple paradigms of social scientific thought.

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> And it would end with a democratized multiparadigmatic, multidisciplinary reorientation of all levels of special education knowledge and concomitant modifications in the curriculum of special education professional education. (Skrtic, 1988a, p. 444)

Skrtic (1988b, 1991) subsequently suggests that teachers embody two distinct sets of special education knowledge. First, they receive a professional training where they learn formal theories and practices related to special education pedagogy. Secondly, ". . . upon entry into the public schools (during the student teaching internship and later as employees), teachers are inculcated into an existing institutionalized subculture of practicing teachers (i.e., the practitioner culture), with its own set of norms, customs, and conventions" (Skrtic, 1988b, p. 506).

Furthermore, Skrtic continues, "Teachers learn to teach by modeling people they have seen teach. . . who got their programs from previous models (see Gehrke & Kay, 1984; Lortie, 1975). And so it goes" (p. 507). The author concludes that the "practitioner culture" has a very narrow and limited view of the world, which can be effected by expanding the disciplinary focus of ". . . special education theoretical, applied, and professional knowledge, and a concomitant revision in the professional education curriculum of special education" (Skrtic, 1988a, p. 433).

While in agreement that a multidisciplinary perspective should be embraced by special education on a formal level, the authors must take issue with Skrtic's assumption that the practitioner culture is necessarily not multidisciplinary on the level of local theory. In fact, this essay suggests quite the opposite--that the level of local theory and classroom culture does reflect multidisciplinary, multiparadigmatic, and multidomain expressions that have not been academically formalized. This study suggests that the approach to expanding the focus of rural special education knowledge should begin with discovering and elaborating special education knowledge at the rural local theory level. This, then, will inform the expansion of theoretical focus at the professional education level, with an immediate grounded relevance. It is this assumption that guides this current effort to provide an ethnosociology of rural special education.

Ethnosociology and Interpretive Thought

The term "ethnosociology" derives from Whiteley's (1988) research on Hopi local theory. More specifically, Whiteley argued ". . . for the utility of taking a Hopi, or ethnosociological, analysis of social and historical processes in explaining . . . sociocultural change. . ." (p. 285). This effectively brought together an anthropological concern for cultural interpretation and a sociological concern for understanding social order. Similarly, this current attempt to formulate and apply an ethnosociology of rural special education seeks to combine an anthropological interest in the cultures of rural special education, and a sociological interest in how social order is conceptualized and constructed in rural special education settings. Both anthropology and sociology are multiparadigmatic disciplines, consequently, it is necessary to briefly discuss the approaches that characterize this particular

vision of ethnosociology--namely, interpretive anthropology, ethnomethodology, and existential sociology.

Interpretive Anthropology

According to Geertz (1983), "Interpretive explanation . . . trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs, all the usual objects of social-scientific interest, mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are" (p. 22). And similarly, "The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is . . . to make available to us answers that others . . . have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man [sic] has said" (1973, p. 30). Seen from this perspective, culture and meaning are one in the same. The culture that any individual lives in, experiences, creates, and/or conceptualizes, is entirely comprised of meaning. Consequently, one cannot discover and describe culture unless local meanings are pursued.

This position does not imply hopeless investigations of private individual worlds. On the contrary, there is an assumption that knowledge, hence meaning, is a socioculture construction. As such, cultural meanings are always the result of group activity.

Turning to this current project, it is the local meaning/culture of groups and individuals involved with rural special education that is of paramount interest. To understand that culture, it is imperative that it be discovered through the individuals that live it.

Sociology of Everyday Life

Ethnomethodology and existential sociology arise from an interpretive tradition in sociology that owes its development to the philosophical works of Heidegger (1962), Husserl (1960, 1968), Sartre (1956) and Schutz (1962). Sociologically, they are variously indebted to Weber (1947), Simmel (1978) and Parsons (1937), and to the later development of symbolic interactionism (e.g., Becker, 1963; Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). While the two approaches overlap a great deal, there are sufficient differences to call for a discussion of each.

Ethnomethodology. As developed by Garfinkel (1956, 1967), ethnomethodology focuses on ". . . how people in their everyday lives, make sense out of, give meaning to, and create a social structure of the world . . ." (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 25). Essentially, it is the study of how individuals accomplish the reality of social order. The focus of study is on the actions and interactions that individuals engage in to bring about and maintain that order. Mehan and wood (1975) offered five propositions that define the foundation of ethnomethodology:

1. The assembly of reality is a reflective act,
2. Social knowledge is organized into coherent groupings,
3. Reality is socially constructed in interaction,
4. Social realities are highly vulnerable to disruption, and
5. Individuals move in and out of different realities on a continuous basis.

This approach emphasizes the cognitive aspects of individual and social experience in much the same way as Geertz' (1973,

1983) interpretive anthropology focuses on the cognitive meanings of cultural symbols. In attempting to discover the local theories of rural special education constructed and conceptualized by groups and individuals in rural contexts, this study most decidedly advocates seeking these same cognitive understandings. At the same time, there is more to social reality than cognitive and rational meaning and behavior. As such, attention is turned to the third foundational theory informing an ethnosociology of special education--existential sociology.

Existential sociology. One of the earliest proposals for an existential sociology was put forth by Tiryakian (1962), when he suggested that positivist, or conventional, science is incapable of truly discovering the nature of human social behavior. He concluded:

> The physical sciences are not always aware of their intrinsic limitations, but the social sciences (in particular, psychology and sociology) are always confronted with their limitations in studying man. Man's freedom in choosing his actions is a foremost limit to the scientific pursuit of absolute knowledge about human behavior. Just as the sciences in toto can only explore and explain "objects" in the world and never the world itself, so the social sciences can only study aspects of man, but never integral man himself. Man as a whole has a nonobjective side which is impervious to scientific research. (pp. 115-116)

The recognition of the freedom to choose, influenced significantly by the works of Sartre (1956), is reflected in other interpretive approaches. However, in their attempts to maintain a vision of objective knowledge, there has been a continued emphasis on cognitive meaning and rational behavior. Reacting to this rational scientific focus, Douglas (1977a) maintained:

> But, even more damning, all such analyses assume implicitly that the everyday social realm can be reduced to cognitive experience without losing the integrity of that realm, although their intermittent recognition of the situationally contingent nature of social life denies that very assumption. (p. 62)

This, then, set the stage for a contemporary model of existential sociology, defined by Douglas (1977a) as, "... the study of human experience-in-the-world (or existence) in all its forms" (p.vii). Similarly, for Denzin (1989b), "Focus is . . . given to uncovering how persons live . . . experiences in their daily lives" (p. 158). Further, it is an ". . . attempt to make the world of problematic lived experience of ordinary people directly available . . ." (1989a, p. 7).

There is an undeniable emphasis on considering the problematic aspects of everyday social reality. This results in a need for viewing and interpreting, not only rational cognitive behaviors, but also irrational behaviors, emotions, feelings and the role of free choice. Douglas (1977a) outlined six basic assumptions that should guide an existential sociology:

1. Social reality represents a fusion of thoughts,

feelings and actions in each individual;
2. Social reality consists of just as much conflict as consensus;
3. Individuals employ a situational rationality that is strongly influenced by feelings and emotions;
4. Social reality is political, in that individuals and groups continuously engage in struggles for power and status;
5. These aspects of social reality can only be discovered through qualitative, interpretive research methods; and,
6. Social reality is always in flux.

This adds the dimensions of irrationality, affective behavior, and social conflict to the present search for local theories of rural special education. These additions are particularly germane in studying rural special education because often times students, teachers and parents become deeply involved with affective influences, irrational behaviors, and the inevitable political conflicts of an educational system established by law.

Ethnosociology and Special Education

Combining interpretive anthropology, enthnomethodology, and existential sociology provides a foundation upon which to build an ethnosociology for the study of rural special education. The following propositions, derived from these interpretive approaches, should guide the development of that ethnosociology.

1. Reality is socially constructed through interaction and reflection, and is constantly changing;
2. Cultural meanings provide for the ways to construct realities, and for the potential content of those realities;
3. Individuals choose their actions based on socially constructed local theories of social order;
4. Local theories of social order are potentially rational and irrational, cognitive and affective, conscious and tacit, and formal and informal, in any combination at any given time and place;
5. Local theories of special education social order, in all their lived dimensions, are the proper subject matter for an ethnosociology of special education;
6. Local theories of social order are primarily accessible through the use of interpretive ethnographic methodologies; and,
7. Interpretive researchers should present their own local theories of the special education phenomena under study to minimize unintentional distortion and enhance interpretation.

This last point is substantiated by a number of scholars who have rejected the notion of the possibility of an objective observer in interpretive research (Berg & Smith, 1988; Denzin, 1989a, 1989b; Douglas, 1977a; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Stainback & Stainback, 1988; Wolcott, 1990). In its place is an observer who has attempted to reflexively understand his or her own theories, both formal and informal, in order to recognize and minimize bias. Douglas (1977b) summarized it nicely when he stated:

> . . . I am not arguing that we begin or end with a presuppositionless knowledge . . . . It is true that our basic common sense ideas of reality, of what constitutes experience of the real world, are commonly presupposed by sociological investigation, and I do not argue that we seek or find a reality completely undetermined by presuppositions of common sense. And certainly each phenomenological or existential sociologist is greatly affected by his own personal experience and individual predictions, so I am not arguing that in some way this kind of sociologist is a tabula rasa researcher, or a medium of social reality who is simply the vessel through which social reality can be known. (pp. 296-297)

In applying this multidisciplinary approach to rural special education, we should arrive at (to paraphrase Bogdan & Knoll, 1988) an ethnosociology of rural special education. That is to say, this approach will allow for a critical interpretation of the realities of rural special education, which should, in turn, provide for the development of more liberating, pragmatic, and relevant practices in rural special education classrooms.

Ethnosociology and Rural Applications: An Example

As stated above it has long been recognized that rural special education is plagued by the dual problems of recruitment and retention. The authors believe that both problems can be addressed through ethnosociology. One of the cornerstones of ethnosociological research is to go among the population that has the problem, or is most effected by the situation under investigation. With that in mind, the authors suggest a total immersion of field workers into the world of the problem. Many of the answers will come out of the data collected. Unlike other types of research that rely on the accumulation of data and then the drawing of conclusions, ethnosociology is a continuous process of data collection, analysis which leads to further avenues to be explored, and so on, until some arbitrary point is decided on at which the researchers say, "We have enough for now."

The first group to be approached for data collection would be special education students effected by the lack of trained personnel in their classrooms. By observing, questioning, and interacting with this population, it could be determined what they feel is needed to draw potential teachers to special education in a rural setting. These same students would be an excellent source in attempting to determine what factors they believe to have been instrumental in the nonretention of special education teachers. Information regarding the attributes of what makes a good teacher could go into the total research package to begin to address the problem of recruitment and retention. The students' theories of what is important to be learned, the method for best conveying that information, and what influence the students themselves have on recruitment and retention should also be considered. By considering this population that is most effected by the dearth of good teachers in rural special education, the matter of recruitment/retention will begin to be seen in a more multidimensional format.

It is also necessary to carry out ethnosociological research among professionals currently teaching in rural special education programs. By spending time with these teachers and learning

their frustrations, causes of stress and burnout, and reasons for staying or leaving, special education administrators will begin to seriously address the problem of retention. This research could best be carried out by inservicing special education teachers in the techniques of ethnosociological research. In this manner, the teachers, with a facilitator who would coordinate the project, would carry out research on their fellow teachers, who, in turn, would carry out research on them. This approach has a number of advantages. First of all, it would cause the teachers to study other teachers, an application that would have value both emotionally and pedagogically. Secondly, a project of this nature would have to include group evaluation of what has been observed. This process of reflection would point out other areas of data collection and begin to point the way to some of the reasons rural special education teachers leave.

Another group to consider learning from by means of ethnosociology is administrators, on both the building and central office levels. If the problems of recruitment and retention are to be adequately addressed, educators must also have an understanding of the problem as the administrator sees it. Parents of special education students could provide valuable resources in understanding what might be offered to teachers and potential teachers in terms of community support. When a rural community loses a special education teacher the entire community suffers. Ethnosociology offers a means of going to these most important participants and attempting to see the problems of recruitment and retention of special education teachers through their eyes.

To develop a better understanding of the specific problem of recruitment, ethnosociological researchers must turn their attention to university undergraduates. A wealth of information is to be had in terms of what incentives would be necessary to induce university undergraduates to become rural special education teachers. Another potential source for information and solutions are local high school seniors. Educational researchers must enter their world in order to better identify potential special education teachers among them. Guidance counselors on both the high school and university levels must be considered in attempting to remediate the problem of special education recruitment.

Once research is carried out with all of the aforementioned groups, the ethnosociological researcher is ready to interpret what has been collected. It must once again be emphasized that these results and interpretations, in turn, create more sources of inquiry. They must also be taken back to the participants to verify the interpretations. A possible solution that could come from this type of research would be an active grant seeking campaign on the part of a school district to provide grants and scholarships for students interested in going into special education. A consortium of school districts might be established to pool their resources for the recruitment of new teachers. Mentoring programs for first-through-third-year teachers could be established. If financial incentives were not possible, the above research might motivate teachers to stay in the classroom.

In the area of preservice training, university students, faculty, and administration, along with school district personnel, should become a source of solutions. These are the populations that have an interest in, and an ability to, effect change. Mentoring programs for education majors could be established in the freshman year. These programs could take

various forms; those forms to be determined by the needs assessed from the ethnosociology carried out among the above populations.

Inservice training could be effectively carried out by a consortium of school districts employing teachers to do the inservicing. Along with the process of determining the inservice needs of rural special education teachers, would come a potential pool of master teachers who could best meet those needs. These teacher/presenters would hold a greater legitimacy in the eyes of their fellow teachers, as well as, affording school districts a cadre of master teachers who could then serve in the part-time capacity of staff development.

The solutions to the problems of recruitment, retention, preservice and inservice training, as well as, the host of other problems that plague rural special education are out there. We, as educators doing ethnosociology, can discover those answers through interpretive research. Those solutions will be as varied and as original as we allow our research to be.

Notes

[1] Portions of this essay have appeared in Hepburn, J.E.L.(1993). Voices from within: Ethnosociological accounts of behavioral disturbance. Manuscript submitted for publication.

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